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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 001147

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: BIBLE BURNING HIGHLIGHTS GROWING ANTI-MISSIONARY  
SENTIMENT IN ISRAEL

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Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The May 15 mass public burning of New Testaments in the Tel Aviv suburb of Or Yehuda highlights a growing trend toward anti-missionary incitement in Jewish neighborhoods throughout Israel. Other notable incidents include the October firebombing of a Jerusalem church shared by Baptists and Messianic Jews (i.e. Jews who believe Jesus was the Messiah) and the March 20 bombing of a Messianic Jewish home in the West Bank settlement of Ariel, in which a 15 year-old boy was gravely wounded. Contacts in Messianic Jewish and Evangelical Christian congregations throughout Israel describe a worsening situation and allege complicity or complacency on the part of police, local governments and the Interior Ministry. For their part, anti-missionary groups such as the ultra-Orthodox Yad l'Achim appear more determined than ever to escalate their campaign against Christian and Messianic congregations that they see as "cults" determined to "steal Jewish souls." END SUMMARY.

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Background  
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12. (SBU) While anti-missionary groups such as the ultra-Orthodox Yad l'Achim ("Hand to the Brothers") have long sought to uproot Messianic Jewish and Evangelical Christian congregations in Israel, their activities have gone largely unnoticed by mainstream Israeli society. Targeted congregations have suffered harassment and occasionally even vandalism or violence at the hands of Yad l'Achim activists, but such incidents rarely made the national press. Despite the harassment, the number of Messianic Jews and Evangelical Christians has grown in recent years through both immigration and conversion. In recent months, however, increased press reporting and complaints from religious freedom activists have indicated an increase in Yad l'Achim activism and a growing, wider backlash against the presence of Evangelical or Messianic congregations and missionaries living in Jewish communities. Contacts describe a mounting sense of fear among Messianic and Evangelical communities, and allege a situation of near impunity where police fail to adequately investigate hate crimes against them. They also claim that the Interior Ministry arbitrarily denies benefits to people it identifies as Messianic Jews or Evangelical Christians. For their part, Yad l'Achim and allied activists appear increasingly determined to head off what they see as the "stealing of Jewish souls" by proselytizing "cults" that use deception and manipulation to prey on the weaker sectors of Israeli Jewish society. (Note: Proselytizing is legal in Israel, as long as it is not directed toward minors and as long as people are not materially induced into conversion. Proselytizing of less-Orthodox Jews by ultra-Orthodox Jewish sects, such as Chabad, is done openly and without the

constraints imposed on non-Jewish groups. End Note.)

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Recent Incidents Underscore Rising Tensions  
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13. (SBU) While an undercurrent of anti-missionary sentiment has long existed in Israel, several recent incidents underscore what Messianic Jewish and Christian groups describe as a dramatic worsening of the situation. As reported in the press, residents of the Tel Aviv suburb of Or Yehuda publicly burned hundreds of Christian Bibles distributed in the community by missionaries in recent months. The May 15 incident was reportedly organized by the Deputy Mayor of Or Yehuda, Attorney Uzi Aharon of Shas, after he received complaints about the Messianic Jewish presence from area residents. After the incident, Aharon told the Israeli daily Ma'ariv that he sent a group of students from a local ultra-Orthodox school throughout the town to collect the New Testaments, which were subsequently burned in front of a synagogue, while "hundreds" of students danced around the burning books. Aharon told Ma'ariv that the municipality operated a team of activists, available 24-hours a day, devoted entirely to uprooting missionary activity, and that the burning was a fulfillment of the commandment to "burn the evil from your midst." While Aharon subsequently sought to downplay his comments by expressing regret for any damage done to Jewish-Christian relations, he continued to defend the burning, telling Israel Army Radio that it was necessary in order to "purge the evil among us." (Note: Israel's Chief Rabbinate, joined by Christian and Muslim leaders from Israel and the West Bank in the Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, issued a statement May 27 condemning the Or Yehuda New Testament burning, while also condemning all attempts to convert a person from one faith to another.)

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14. (SBU) PolOff obtained a flyer distributed by Aharon's anti-missionary team in the months before the burning, exhorting residents to "Save your families!... Say no to missionaries who look for your soul... Be careful! Reject them! Chase them away from the place you live!" The flyer listed the cell phone numbers of Aharon and other members of the team, and was accompanied by leaflets with the names, photos and addresses of local residents accused of harboring Messianic beliefs. (Note: "Outing" Messianic Jews and Evangelical Christians through the publication of names, photos and addresses alongside flyers with hysterical allegations about "soul stealing" and "brainwashing" is a favorite tactic of Yad l'Achim branches throughout the country.)

15. (SBU) Other recent incidents also highlight the growing threat to Messianic and evangelical congregations. On March 20, 15 year-old Ami Ortiz -- a dual American-Israeli citizen and the son of a Messianic Jewish pastor -- was seriously wounded when a bomb disguised in a gift basket exploded in his home in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. Earlier this month controversy erupted over the disclosure that an Israeli finalist in the International Jewish Bible Quiz was a Messianic Jew, prompting Israel's two Chief Rabbis to call for the cancellation of the quiz on the grounds that selecting the 15 year-old "cult member" represented a "transgression of Jewish law." In October, arsonists fire-bombed a church in Jewish West Jerusalem shared by Baptists and Messianic Jews, while more recently, residents of the secular, upscale Jerusalem neighborhood of Rehavia threatened violence -- an "all-out-war," in the words of one resident -- over plans by a Messianic Jewish organization to open an information center there.

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Bureaucratic Complicity and Police Complacency  
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¶6. (C) Yad l'Achim and other anti-missionary activists may also have allies, tacit or active, in the Interior Ministry and police departments, where clerks and police officers have wide discretion in deciding which national benefits a person is entitled to and which crimes are worth investigating, given limited resources. Contacts in Messianic and Christian congregations in Arad and Be'er Sheva have long complained that police in those cities fail to take seriously hate crimes against their members. Following the Ortiz incident, several members of other congregations throughout the country complained to the press of similar problems in their communities. In a recent meeting with PolOff, Jehovah's Witnesses Associate General Counsel James Andrick and Regional Representative Mauro Trapanese noted a dramatic increase in violent assaults and other crimes against their members in the past year (up from 1-2 a month in early 2007 to 8-10 now), and complained of an almost complete refusal by police to investigate or apprehend the perpetrators.

¶7. (C) Messianic Jews and evangelical Christians also regularly complain of discrimination in the workplace and by officials in the Interior Ministry and local governments. Attorney and Director of the Jerusalem Institute of Justice Calev Myers told PolOff that there appeared to be a semi-coordinated effort among bureaucrats in the Interior Ministry's Population Registry to deny routine national services to citizens identified to them, usually by Yad l'Achim or other activists, as Messianic Jews or Evangelical Christians. Myers provided PolOff with dozens of affidavits and complaints from Israelis who were refused identification cards, passports, or birth certificates on the basis of their beliefs. In several cases, the Interior Ministry has even sought to revoke the citizenship of people alleged to be Messianic Jews or Evangelical Christians. Myers showed PolOff a letter to a Jewish man otherwise eligible to immigrate under the Law of Return, in which the Interior Ministry wrote that it was rejecting his application for status and ordering him to leave the country in 14 days because he "was involved in Messianic faith... (and) a person who is eligible for the Right of Return who advances the Messianic faith acts illegally."

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